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SUBJECT: UNSC: MECCA AGREEMENT AND TEMPLE MOUNT

11. Summary: In the monthly Security Council briefing on the Middle East held February 13, UNSCO Alvaro de Soto said that the Mecca agreement and recent international initiatives to re-energize the peace process, especially the commitment of the Quartet partners, showed "potential" for progress. Challenges to that progress, however, include continued violence among Palestinians and between Palestinians and Israelis; Palestinian institutions weakened by a Palestinian fiscal crisis; and Israel's continued settlement and barrier construction activities. In their comments, Council members commended the Quartet and Secretary Rice for their respective efforts to date and acknowledged the Mecca agreement. Some members suggested that the agreement was sufficient to merit the resumption of direct financial assistance to the Palestinians; others said they would await action by the new Palestinian National Unity Government in accordance with Quartet principles. Council members also expressed their concerns about the threat to the cessation of hostilities between Lebanon and Israel posed by the February 7 LAF/IDF Blue Line incident and the negative reaction provoked by the Israeli excavations at the Temple Mount. In addition to presentations by the Security Council, 20 other states spoke. The majority criticized the impact and significance of the Israeli excavations at the Temple Mount. Most speakers condemned the February 13 bus bombings. End Summary.

De Soto: Potentials for Progress and its Challenges

12. In his February 13 "Briefing to the Security Council on the Situation in the Middle East," United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process (UNSCO) Alvaro de Soto said that the February 2 Quartet meeting, the recent Mecca agreement, the February 19 trilateral meeting convened by Secretary Rice, and the Quartet meeting in Berlin on February 21 are signs of "potential" for progress. At the same time, he identified ongoing violence, the weakened state of Palestinian institutions and the Palestinian economy, and continuing Israeli settlements and construction of the separation barrier as challenges to that progress. De Soto discussed the "potential" of a "commissioning letter" President Abbas is planning to send to Prime Minister Hannieh as part of the formation of a new government that will meet certain international requirements. But he cautioned that the Mecca agreement "has other aspects that needed to be examined, has yet to be implemented and had not been the subject of full discussion among Quartet partners" to date. He noted that the Quartet had recently reaffirmed its support for a government committed to no-violence, recognition of Israel, and the acceptance of previous agreements and obligations, including the Roadmap. On the February 19 trilateral meeting, de Soto quoted Secretary Rice's remark that the goal is "to have discussions about the broad issues on the horizon so that we can work on the Road Map and try to accelerate the Road Map and move toward the establishment of a Palestinian state."

13. De Soto said that there are three primary challenges to progress. The first is violence, including both Palestinian factional violence such as the violence generated by struggles between partisans of Hamas and Fatah, and Israeli-Palestinian violence, which includes suicide bombings and tensions over the Israeli construction of a new walkway at the Temple Mount. A second set of challenges, de Soto said, involves the Palestinian economy, which is hampered by patchy implementation of the Agreement on Movement and Access, and Palestinian institutions such as schools, hospitals and ministries, which have been weakened by the Palestinian fiscal crisis. De Soto said a third set of challenges result from Israel's continued failure to remove settlement outposts, and its continued settlement activity and barrier construction, notwithstanding provisions of the Fourth Geneva Conventions and the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

14. On Lebanon, de Soto reported that morning's (February 13) double bus bombing in Beirut, the continuing domestic political impasse, Arab League efforts at mediation and the UN's recent appointment of an UNSCO, Geir Pederson, for Lebanon. De Soto provided details of the February 7 LAF/IDF Blue Line incident as an illustration of the continued volatility of the situation in southern Lebanon. He concluded: "The firing by the LAF constituted a violation of resolution 1701 and a breach of the cessation of hostilities agreement. The IDF also violated resolution 1701 by crossing the Blue Line. The exchange of fire posed a threat to the lives of UNIFIL troops patrolling in the area." Finally de Soto reported the February 6 UN-Lebanese Republic agreement on the Establishment of a Special Tribunal for Lebanon, noting that the UN remained hopeful that "the Lebanese institutions will be able to perform their tasks and

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responsibilities on the way to the establishment of the Tribunal."

Security Council Members Comments

15. In their comments, Security Council members spoke mainly on four issues: the Mecca agreement, Israeli excavations at the Temple Mount, the February 7 LAF/IDF Blue Line incident, and recent and future diplomatic initiatives to reinvigorate the peace process. Every delegation acknowledged the potential significance of the Mecca agreement. Qatar, South Africa and Congo welcomed the decision by Fatah and Hamas to form of National Unity Government (NUG) and said the parties had made concessions sufficient to merit the end of the international financial blockade against the Palestinian people. France acknowledged the agreement as a step in the right direction; UK said it was awaiting the details of the agreement and looked forward to engaging with a government based on the Quartet principles.

16. South Africa, supported by Ghana, Qatar and Indonesia, articulated the complaint against the Israeli excavations at the Temple Mount: they constitute a unilateral action that could prejudice final status negotiations. They also argued that the excavations threatened the collapse of the holy site above it, the Al-Aqsa Mosque. Russia counseled Israel to restrain from taking unilateral steps that would change the status quo; Panama urged Israel, irrespective of reasons for the excavations, to consider the political consequences of its acts. Council members expressed general support for recent and contemplated U.S. and Quartet efforts to reinvigorate Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. France called for an international conference to support the process and to provide guarantees. Most Council members regretted the February 7 LAF/IDF Blue Line incident, worried that it threatened the cessation of hostilities, and cautioned Israel and Lebanon to exercise maximum restraint.

17. Per Department provided points, Ambassador Wolff reviewed

recent significant developments: Secretary Rice's productive meetings with Prime Minister Olmert and President Abbas in January, the February 2 Washington-hosted Quartet principals meeting, Secretary Rice's February 9 discussions with Quartet counterparts. He also cited Secretary Rice's trilateral meeting with Abbas and Olmert on February 19 and the Quartet meeting scheduled for Berlin on February 21. Ambassador Wolff commended Saudi King Abdullah's efforts to bring an end to violence between Palestinians and said the U.S. would continue to assess the outcome of the meetings in Mecca, looking closely at implementation to ensure that the three Quartet principles are met. On the strong reaction to construction of the ramp at the Temple Mount, he urged the parties to exercise great care when deciding whether and how to engage in any activity near religious sites, called for appropriate rhetoric in dealing with the issue, and advised the need to focus on facts. On Lebanon, Ambassador Wolff expressed strong U.S. condemnation of the February 13 terrorist attack in Beirut, and, referring to the February 7 incident on the Blue line and the anniversary of the death of Rafiq Hariri, underscored the need for the parties to exercise restraint. He reiterated strong U.S. support for the UN International Independent Investigation Commission and our desire for to the timely establishment of an international tribunal. Finally he noted U.S. concern about reports of continued shipments of arms to Hizballah and other armed groups.

Open Debate: Palestine and Israel, Lebanon and Syria

18. Twenty countries, several speaking on behalf of regional organizations, and the Chair of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, also delivered statements. Speaking for the Palestinians, Permanent Observer Riyad Mansour reviewed President Abbas' plans, following the Mecca agreement, to guide the future formation of a national unity government so as to provide for the lifting of "the financial blockade" imposed on the Palestinian people. He also looked forward to the February 19 trilateral meeting, during which both practical issues such as prisoner releases and the release of tax revenues and political process issues such as final status talks would be addressed. Finally Mansour characterized Israel's construction activity at the Temple Mount as illegal, politically motivated and extremely explosive. He said the activity endangered the sanctity, integrity and foundations of the Al-Aqsa Mosque. He further asserted that Israeli forces had used excessive force against Palestinians during a February 9 incident at the Al-Aqsa Mosque and reminded that previous dangerous actions there had ignited the 2000

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Intifada.

19. Addressing the Mecca agreement, Israeli PR Gillerman reminded the audience that the international community had clearly determined that any Palestinian government would have to fully adopt the three Quartet principles and that this requirement is not negotiable. Yet, he continued, only recently a Hamas spokesman had said, "the agreement reached in Mecca does not mean recognition of the Israeli entity...it is a non-recognition of the legitimacy of the Zionist movement." Gillerman added that the Mecca agreement did not condemn violence and terrorism either. Gillerman also provided a lengthy explanation for Israeli excavations at the Temple Mount, arguing that the situation had been blown out of proportion. He said that the work was taking place in full transparency, with sensitivity, in accordance with various antiquities and in coordination with various religious authorities to ensure the safety of visitors. Far from causing damage to Al-Aqsa as some have charged, Gillerman asked what the world would say if Israel allowed the ramp being repaired to collapse.

10. Speaking for Lebanon, Charge Caroline Ziade said the

double bus bombing that had occurred that morning was indicative of the instability in the region and said that Prime Minister Siniora has requested UNIIIC technical assistance to investigate this act of terror. Ziade criticized Israeli excavation activity at the Temple Mount and provided the Lebanese perspective of the February 7 LAF/IDF incident along the Blue Line, asserting that Israeli armed force had provoked the incidents by not resorting to coordination and liaison channels. Syrian PR Bashar Ja'afari devoted most of his statement to making the case that Israel has systematically defied the UN and the international community by confiscating territory -- Syrian, Lebanese and Palestinian -- and that the most recent manifestation of this trend was Israel's construction activities at the Al-Aqsa Mosque. In its defiance of the international community, Ja'afari noted, a superpower (the US) and its "44 vetoes" had been complicit.

Open Debate: Arab Group, EU

¶11. Speaking for the Arab Group, Kuwaiti PR Abdullah Al Murad commended the Mecca agreement and hoped that an effective national unity government would soon be formed. He delivered a lengthy objection to Israeli excavation activities at the Temple Mount, citing international law. He warned that the Arab Group reserved the right to raise the issue again should Israel continue its "illegal excavations." Speaking for the EU, German PR Thomas Matussek emphasized the Quartet's intention to remain closely engaged with the peace process. Additionally he said that the EU fully supported the forthcoming trilateral meeting to be hosted by Secretary Rice. He said the EU welcomed the Mecca agreement on the formation of a Palestinian national unity government and that it stood ready to work with a legitimate Palestinian government that adopted a platform reflecting the Quartet principles. On Lebanon, the EU welcomed the Paris III meeting that resulted in USD 7.6 million in pledges for Lebanese support of which moneys EU countries provided forty percent.

Other Statements

¶12. Cuba, speaking for the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), expressed its support for Palestinian President Abbas' rejection of a proposal for a Palestinian state with provisional borders, adding that that NAM also rejected any attempts to alter the terms of reference of the peace process and the imposition of unilateral measures by Israel. The NAM also condemned Israeli excavation activities at the Temple Mount as "a provocation to the feelings and sentiments of more than one billion Muslims in the world." Cuba specifically attributed the Security Council's failure to act against Israel to the "31 vetoes" the US has cast on the resolutions related to the question of Palestine, calling the vetoes an undemocratic and obsolete privilege. Iran expressed delight at the Mecca agreement and the imminent formation of a Palestinian national unity government, condemned Israeli excavation activities at the Temple Mount and blamed "one country" from preventing the Security Council from taking action against Israel, which is "the greatest threat to international peace and security." In its statement, Japan said it is working on the concept of a "Corridor of Peace and Prosperity," a development plan for the Jordan Valley which will involve regional cooperation among Israel, Palestine and Jordan. Several speakers -- Morocco on behalf of the Al Quds Group, Azerbaijan on behalf

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of the OIC, Pakistan, Jordan and Bangladesh -- devoted the majority of their statement to various concerns related to Israeli excavations at the Temple Mount.
WOLFF